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# Queering Chineseness: The Queer Sphere of Feelings in *Farewell My Concubine* and *Green Snake*

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**Abstract:** *This paper discusses queerness in* Farewell My Concubine *(1993, dir. Chen Kaige) and* Green Snake *(1993, dir. Tsui Hark). Tracing the process of the textual transmission of these cinematic adaptations back to their* chuanqi *origins, I discuss queerness, not in terms of representational politics, but within the framework of affective agency. Upholding the concept of* qing *(sentiments, emotions or feelings) as a central paradoxical concept – that celebrates genuine individual feelings and at the same time serves as a mode of sentimental education – that enables the reiterative freedom of the* chuanqi *tradition, I argue that queerness in both films emerges out of this reiterative impulse that generates the sphere of queer feelings as a nonnormative structure of feelings. In the case of* Farewell My Concubine*, the filmic text creates a narrative closure that imposes a nationalistic ideology at the expense of feminine and queer agency. Nevertheless, Leslie Cheung, the actor who portrays the female impersonator, through his performance creates an affective force that extends beyond the textual realm and spawns social discussion of queer sexuality.* Green Snake *is a revisionist adaptation that renarrativises* The Legend of the White Snake *from the green snake's perspective and engenders a queer sphere of feelings that revisits the existential divide between the human and the nonhuman. My reading shows that the radical queer interrogations of the sex/gender/sexuality normative alignment in these films must be found in affective moments.*

**Keywords:** qing *(sentiments, emotions, feelings)*, chuanqi *(the Chinese folkloric tradition), affective subjectivity, reiterative freedom, Leslie Cheung, Lilian Lee,* yao *(the nonhuman)*

## Seeing Chinese Queer (*tongzhi*) in the Global Cinemascape

Scholars of contemporary Chinese queer studies often identify the Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival as the key cultural event that has popularised the use of

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the neologism *tongzhi* (literally meaning "comrade").[1] Instead of using the acronym LGBTQ, from "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer", the organisers have adopted *tongzhi* as their agreed Chinese equivalent to officially indicate the queer nature of this festival. Aside from its historical significance, this story also entails a political dimension: the correlation between the emergence of queer subjects in Chinese communities and the change in the global cinemascape. Song Hwee Lim points out that:

> It is significant that the new discursive language for homosexuality in Chinese societies has been occasioned by the introduction of lesbian and gay films from all over the world and that its circulation started in cinematic circles in these societies... on the other hand, it exemplifies how a new discursive language can use cinema as a vehicle to transcend national boundaries and, in the process, act as a catalyst for new identity categories and new forms of solidarity (Lim, 2006, p. 12).

Lim's observation makes it clear that cultural flows in the global cinemascape propel the engendering of queer subjects. While acknowledging that global capitalism facilitates these flows, Lim, drawing upon Arjun Appadurai, regards international film festivals as disjunctive sites where the exploitative logic of capital flows stumbles and "marginal elements and identities have global interconnections" (Lim, 2006, p. 12). Lim's tracing of *tongzhi* visibility, in a way, echoes scholars' recent advocacy for the necessity of local thick description.[2] That is, even though gay and lesbian identities are first and foremost products of North American liberalist emancipatory politics, the variations in such sexualised subject positions in other places are nonetheless informed by their local specificities. Thick descriptions heed the cultural interactions between the local and the global; they attempt to delineate the formation processes of these locally engendered sexual identities through in-depth investigations of transnational or transcultural sites. In so doing, they emphasise how these forms of sexual identity are informed by, but also different from, the international signifiers of "gay" and "lesbian".

In this paper, following this strand of transnational queer studies, I analyse how queerness is presented in two Chinese films – *Farewell My Concubine* (1993, dir. Chen Kaige) and *Green Snake* (1993, dir. Tsui Hark). In choosing these two films, I hope to illustrate how a Chinese folkloric tradition – the marvel tale (*chuanqi*) – can be reinterpreted with a modern sensibility to articulate queerness. In contrast to later *tongzhi* movies that feature self-identified homosexual characters and carry an explicit political agenda, *Farewell* and *Green Snake*, which appeared prior to the reification of *tongzhi* identity politics, do not register explicit political awareness of sexual dissidence. The queerness in both films must be considered in affective terms, as their queer sensibility is a hybridised result of the interaction between modern sexual politics and the Chinese folklore tradition. Their reinterpretations renew the already-existing paradoxical notion of feelings in the *chuanqi* tradition and enable queer desires to emerge.

In canonical Chinese literary historiography, *chuanqi* specifically refers to a form of vernacular short fiction produced in the Tang dynasty (618–907AD). Nevertheless, one can also use it as a generic term to encompass the variations on this literary genre throughout history, as *chuanqi*, literally meaning "the passing down of uncanny

tales'', connotes the two defining features of this genre – story transmission and the uncanny.[3] The stories often became popular among the common people for the unbelievable heterotopia they described. The educated literati, who had access to letters and cultural capital, collected and organised these stories into anthologised texts. The literati's narrative frames might seem to circumscribe the contours of the stories. However, as various cases of textual transmission show, the stories themselves often go through multiple afterlives, mutating into different narratives as time goes on.[4]

If the literati's narrative closure entails a moralising intent in the textualising process, it is my contention that the open-endedness of this oral/textual tradition enables infinite possibilities for renarrativisation – a reiterative freedom made possible by the inherent tension between an account of uncanny human desire and an attempt at poetic moralisation in the *chuanqi* tradition. The concept of *qing* (feelings, emotions or sentiments) was upheld by imperial literati as the authentic source of one's being. The moral order of society, they proclaimed, must be yoked with the genuine feelings of the people. This view of authentic feelings, at the outset, seemed to help the literati to carve out a space for personal desire in these tales from the dominion of Confucian morality. Notwithstanding this, they usually reintroduced a moral restoration after the transgressions of desire, defeating their celebration of genuine human feelings. I observe an inherent paradox in the way *qing* is dealt with in this tradition. On the one hand, it indeed spawns transgressive desires; on the other, it usually reinstates the orthodox with the pretext of *qing*. I argue that it is exactly this paradox that keeps attempts to renarrativise going. As socio-political climates change, people's genuine feelings also take on different forms of expression. It is not difficult to imagine how people find this paradox a good vehicle for rearticulating the tensions between personal desire and moral binding. The reiterative impulse in this tradition is the living source for people within a Confucian moral system to address the ongoing tensions between individual freedom and political dominance, personal desire and moral control.

At the outset, such a literary tradition seems to provide an aesthetic space for performative agency, à la Judith Butler (1993), to exist. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it would be an anachronism to discuss subjective agency in a pre-modern tradition. To understand how the tension between the personal and the socio-political plays out, one should pay attention to the affective dimensions of this tradition. The tension between personal choice and moral demand is dealt with by means of sentimentalism – and indeed moral sentimentalism is the defining feature of this tradition. Another way to understand the moral sentimentalism in this tradition is to examine the aesthetic features of Chinese classical theatre, an important inheritor of the *chuanqi* tradition. In contrast to the Aristotelian dramatic tradition that upholds plot as the primary element, classical Chinese theatre makes performance the focus of the staging; its aesthetic appeal, rather than drawing the audience to figure out the movement of the plot, lies in the performers' enactment of the emotionally charged moments when the characters' living situations collide with the normative moral system. Theatre scholar Haiping Yan explains that:

> Chinese music-drama focuses on the ''human feelings'' in tension with social script's normative legibility. The central point here is not so much how one

> finds "what is real" in a normal world, but how one feels in the midst of being out of joint with the world (Yan, 2003, p. 76).

Yan further explicates that the feelings evoked in those moments of tension do not serve to psychologise the inner states of the characters; rather, they are affects that indicate something "relational and transformational";[5] affects are not felt emotional states of others but rather flows of sentiments that traverse the boundaries of social beings and re-territorialise ethical relationships via theatricalisation. She states,

> I trace how "the theatrical" in Chinese music-drama is infused with Confucian ethical questions such as "just or unjust," "right or wrong," and "good or bad," how the theatrical acts so engendered both express and exceed the socioculturally specific content of the questions, and how the theatrical and the ethical work through each other dynamically in the narratives and performance while reconstituting each other into an ever-renewable source for imagination and human transformation (Yan, 2003, p. 67).

In Yan's formulation, the possibility of social change in this tradition does not lie in the emergence of individual awareness but in the theatricalised moments of ethical tension. Her reinterpretation of the ethical question, to a certain degree, is an attempt to excavate the possibility for "personal freedom" from a tradition that has been regarded as feudalistic and incompatible with the modern concept of enlightened individualism. While Rey Chow regards such an affective dimension in Chinese culture as a form of sentimentalism for moral binding,[6] Yan, among many others, celebrates this "cult of *qing*" as a pre-Western cultural source of political change.

From historical hindsight, it would run the risk of essentialisation to regard this sentimental tradition in Chinese culture without historicising its changing contours. To remedy this postcolonial dilemma, I find Haiyan Lee's (2007) genealogy of love useful in understanding how this literary tradition can contest, supplant or be in dialogue with later historical introductions of modern thought of enlightenment, romanticism, Freudian sexology, psychology and nationalism. Lee terms the tension between illicit desire and moral demand in this tradition the Confucian structure of feelings, which will later be contested, reinterpreted and incorporated by the enlightenment and revolutionary structures of feelings. The concept of changing structures of feelings suggests that the understanding of emotions must be considered in tandem with technologies of social production and reproduction. The changing meanings of emotive terms cannot exist outside the shifting historical fields of social organisation. Lee's genealogy does not imply a historical teleology that witnesses the eventual replacement of the Confucian moral system by modern liberal, national or socialist thought; it marks those structural changes as moments of epistemic breaks when older concepts are transformed and remade into new ones (Lee, 2007, pp. 17–21).

I situate my reading of *Farewell* and *Green Snake* in Lee's genealogical mapping. Both emerging in the mid-1990s, when North American queer politics were just being introduced to Taiwan and Hong Kong, *Farewell* and *Green Snake*, though informed by queer identity politics, cannot be reduced to modern examples of

individual sexual awareness. Queer sensibilities here must be considered as a modern rewriting of the paradoxical nature of *qing*. Their reiterations pick up the unresolved tension between personal desire and moral demand in the *chuanqi* tradition. Queer desires here are presented as forms of genuine feelings, whose conflicts with the existing moral system produce sentimentalism that affectively appeals to the audience for a reconsideration of Confucian ethics and its contemporary forms.

However, are the queer sentiments produced in these reiterations eventually resolved by a narrative closure and subsumed under a reintroduced moral system? Do the feelings help to raise political awareness and bring forth dissident sexual consciousness? If, in the context of contemporary imagined communities, the question of morality is often bound up with that of national sympathy, do the queer feelings here suggest a radical refusal of the heteronormative demands of the nation state? To answer these questions, let me begin with the literary predecessors of the films – Lilian Lee's novels.

## Queer Desire in the National Space

Both *Farewell* and *Green Snake* are based on Hong Kong novelist Lilian Lee's revisionist novels of two Chinese folkloric staples (Lee, 1993; 1993). As Min Gan and Jennifer Feeley (2010) point out, Lilian Lee's revisions border the distinctions between high brow and low brow cultures, a cultural phenomenon that is symptomatic of Hong Kong's postcolonial identity in relation to China. Gan and Feeley keenly observe, in a favourable tone, that Lilian Lee's consumerism-driven style that distorts, twists and reforms Chinese literary traditions epitomises a Hong Kong identity that is "a new appearance constructed upon an incomplete disappearance" (2010, p. 5). In the midst of historical change, Hong Kong is always grappling with its own image among the interlocking memories of imperial China, British colonialism, capitalism and Chinese nationalism. All of Lilian Lee's revisionist novels are written on the eve of the scheduled handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Considering the historicity of their publication, we might boldly argue that her tales are Hong Kong's postcolonial allegories that express "the fear of the imminent transformation of Hong Kong into a unifying nationalistic identity" (Gan and Feeley, 2010, p. 6). If the folkloric elements represent images of China, Lee's phantasmagoric renderings are her imaginary reconstructions of China. They speak more about Hong Kong's phantasmatic relations with China than of realities about China. Seen in this light, it makes sense that Lee's adaptation heavily hinges on the supernatural or uncanny elements that can unsettle one's identificatory relationships with worldly orders.

In the cases of *Farewell* and *Green Snake*, the liminal state of being of the female impersonator and the inhuman, respectively, serve as good devices for Lee to re-fabricate traditional narratives for alternative world views. Through imagined tensions between these "deviant" beings and the sanctioned moral system, she can aspire to new possibilities of sociality and human lives. This is where queerness emerges in her reiteration of the *chuanqi* tradition. The uncanny in her stories, therefore, cannot be interpreted separately from the allegorical. The gender-bender, the ghostly, and the inhuman are all "unnatural" elements to open up an allegorical space for Lee, who is first and foremost a postcolonial Hong Kong writer, to

re-imagine her relations with historical memories, national traumas, Chinese identities, and Hong Kong's future.

Such an allegorical dimension is very explicit in *Farewell*, and the difference between the original and the cinematic versions is pivotal for us to understand how the author Lee and the cinematographer Chen differ in their attitudes towards Chinese nationalism. Political allegory seems to be less obvious in *Green Snake*, a story that originally appeared in the Song dynasty (960–1279AD) and was first textualised during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644AD), an era when Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism were all integrated into a Confucianised cosmic concept of ethics (Fan, 2003).[7] The political struggle between modern selfhood and state sovereignty, in my view, is rearticulated through Lee's reinterpretations of the triangulated relationships between Fahai, Xu Xian, and the two snakes in the novel. If, in the West, the modern nation state derives its transcendental sovereignty from an earlier theological basis, the modern Chinese nation state has to rely upon Confucian morality for legitimacy. The coupling of Fahai and Xu Xian, though appearing to be a Buddhist-Confucian moral compound, is representative of such logic of sovereignty formation. Lee revises this story from Xiao Qing's (the green snake's) perspective and creates grounds for political dissidence against this nationalised moral regime.

The following discussion will start with an analysis of how gender politics intersect with national politics in *Farewell* the movie. I will show, at the textual level, how Chen's adaptation removes the transgressive possibility in Lee's novel. Nevertheless, as my above discussion of the *chuanqi* tradition shows, no matter how renarrativisations try to textually foreclose the possibilities of "illicit" desire, the affective tension presented in the text will eventually exceed the narrative contour and continue its flow to ongoing mutations and variations. In this case, I would like to shift my discussion to Leslie Cheung – the actor who portrays the female impersonator – and examine how his use of gossip and other performances continues this mutating process – the afterlives of the queer feelings from the text.

Leslie Cheung started his career as a heart throb Hong Kong actor in the 1980s. Even though he had already established an iconic male image, he put himself forward for the role of the female impersonator in *Farewell*. After his excellent and "convincing" performance in the film, people began to gossip about his sexuality and his public image started to change. Instead of evading the voyeuristic control of the public, he wisely played along with people's voyeuristic desire and rebuilt his public persona, culminating in his public "coming out" moment in a concert. Even though he ended his life tragically by committing suicide, he has become an iconic figure for later sexual dissidents and his great performances in various films have been recognised by scholars and critics for their aesthetic as well as socio-political significance.

My discussion of *Farewell* prepares me to return to consider *Green Snake* the film later in the article. Not surprisingly, as an adaptation by a Hong Kong director, Tsui Hark, *Green Snake* the film follows Lee's original plotting and presents a visually stunning picture of the rebellion of the inhuman. At the textual level, this film revisits the sentimentalism of the *chuanqi* tradition, presenting a radically uncompromising queer gesture against the forces of normativity.

## The Nation and its Women

*Farewell My Concubine* tells the story of two Peking opera actors – Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi – and their ordeal of passage to stardom against the backdrop of China's transformation into a modernised nation state in the twentieth century. Interweaving the triangulated relationship drama between Xiaolou, Dieyi and Juxian (Xiaolou's wife) with important political events in modern Chinese history – e.g. the nationalist revolution, the Japanese occupation, the communist revolution and the Cultural Revolution – *Farewell My Concubine* is often read by feminist critics as a national allegory that deploys the feminine figures – Juxian and Dieyi – as tropes of the nation to remasculinise a Chinese national viewing subject.

Wendy Larson reads the feminine characters as figurative of the historical past that can help to "reject history in favor of fantasy as the means through which Chinese national subjects who want to enter transnational culture must produce personal and cultural narratives" (Larson, 1997, p. 333). In a similar vein, E. Ann Kaplan, borrowing psychoanalytic language, sees the film as an allegory that provides "powerful links between individual abandonment neurosis and traumas in the public political and historical sphere" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 273). Echoing existing scholarly critiques of the ubiquitous image of the suffering woman in Chinese cinematic construction of the nation,[8] Cui Shuqi focuses on the portrayal of the dehumanising training and trading in Peking Opera, regarding Dieyi's "forced femininity" as a result of the triumph of "the cultural self" (Cui, 2003, p. 168). All of these critics read the film as a national allegory in which the private intersects with the public, melodrama imbricates politics, and most importantly, the personal depends on the national.

Following this line of argument, we can also read an allegorical intent in the representation of homosexuality in the film. To understand how it works, let us consider the allegorical meaning of the becoming journey of the female impersonator. Before he adopts the stage name Dieyi as a female impersonator, Xiao Dozhi is a rebellious disciple. As indicated by the initial scene in which he repeatedly refuses to recite the line, "I am by nature a girl, not a boy", Xiao Dozhi's resistance is tenacious and persistent. The watershed moment comes when the moral lesson of *Farewell My Concubine* is introduced. In this age-old theatrical repertoire, the Hegemon-King of Chu is defeated and cornered on the banks of the Wu River. Deprived of his kingdom and people, the King is left with only a horse and his concubine, Yuji, at his side. In the midst of his hopelessness and desperation, the King sings his famous aria, expressing his loss of valour and will. In response to the King's despair, Yuji pours wine to comfort him and performs a sword dance to entertain him, which is immediately followed by her suicide, a symbolic act of sacrifice and preservation – she takes her own life so that the King can make sure her chastity is preserved only for the King himself. The central moral of the story – "being loyal to one" – is then introduced, teaching the lesson of submission and loyalty to one's political superior, as symbolised by the figure of Yuji.

In this sequence, Xiao Dozhi is singled out from his co-disciples and ordered to kneel down in front of the altar of the troupe founders that has a mural painting of the key scenarios from *Farewell My Concubine* atop it. A shot-reverse-shot is used to intercut the images of the preaching master, the disobedient Xiao Dozhi and the

silent observing crowd. The tension between the three images is soon intensified when images of the mural and non-diegetic sound effects are introduced to heighten the moral meaning of the lesson. Symbolically occupying the role of an heir to tradition, Xiao Dozhi is apparently moved to tears. As the storytelling ends, the superimposition of the three images cuts to a close-up of Xiao Dozhi, whose face is now covered in tears. In front of the master and his co-disciples, he starts to slap his cheeks until they bleed, showing his remorse and repentance.

This is a visual glorification of Xiao Dozhi's moment of interpellation. Accompanied by audio-visual grandeur, this moment portrays his transformation as a consequence of the moral indoctrination of loyalty. His transformation, therefore, results in the coerced adoption of the role of Yuji – he is now the embodiment of the quintessential feminine virtues of submissiveness, loyalty and sacrifice.

If Xiao Dozhi's transformation allegorises the making of a feminine subject at the demand of the state, the incongruity between his gender and his sex renders this demand inadequate. To resolve this conundrum, the film portrays Dieyi as a suffering artist who confuses reality and fictionality and eventually falls into a decadent world of homoeroticism. Many critics have pointed out that homosexuality in *Farewell* is portrayed in a problematic, pathological way as gender inversion and violent coercion.[9] We could further extend this analysis and argue that this pathological depiction necessitates a nationalistic purpose that aims to secure a masculine national identification position by abstracting the glorified feminine principle from the hystericised body of the female impersonator.

Therefore, Dieyi's public and private lives, as opposed to those of Xiaolou, are portrayed in an asymmetrical way. Xiaolou rescues Juxian from prostitution, procreates for the nation, and most importantly, refuses to sing for the Japanese occupiers. His heteronormative personal life attests to his stage image as a national hero. On the other hand, Dieyi's stage image is contrasted with his life image. His life practice has no quality comparable to Yuji's – he indulges in opium and homoeroticism; he is unhealthily jealous of Juxian and destructive to her marriage; and, most unforgivably, he sings for the occupying Japanese. This asymmetry goes on until the final moment in which Dieyi's gender trouble is "rectified" and "corrected" by his suicide.

Arguing against readings that find fault with these homophobic depictions, Song Hwee Lim interprets this use of femininity as a cultural evocation of the Chinese literary tradition of the Qu Yuan lore, which makes Dieyi "the embodiment of an uncompromising artist with a moral high ground for his political dissidence and as an ineluctable self-allegorization for the director and his relationship with the state" (Lim, 2006, p. 83). His analysis focuses on the gender aspects of the political implications of this literary trope and concludes that "the figure of homosexuality in which femininity resides becomes the unacknowledged Other" (Lim, 2006, p. 88).

The tension in Lee's analysis, in my view, provides us with a good way out of the confinements of textual analysis of the film. Trying to read the possibility of queerness in this film, Lim's wavering theoretical position actually suggests possibilities of affective agency here. At the textual level, Chen's adaptation produces an effect of narrative closure for nationalistic purposes. In Lee's novel, the actors survive and move to Hong Kong for new lives. The novel ends with Dieyi's bus ride around the postcolonial city of Hong Kong, pondering the meaning of his

life among the hustle and bustle of the material quotidian life. By having Dieyi die and ending the movie in a highly aestheticised moment of theatrical performance, Chen drastically transforms Lee's postcolonial allegory into a Chinese national recuperation. No matter how Dieyi represents the principle of aesthetic integrity, his transgression of the heteronormative regime must be stopped. Nevertheless, there exists a tension, as Lim cogently elucidates, between his images as an uncompromising moral aesthete and a pathological gender-inverted homosexual. I contend that this tension cannot be easily resolved by the textual closure. As my previous discussion of the *chuanqi* tradition shows, this tension might seem to be resolved for the purpose of sentimental moral teaching at the textual level but its affective excess will spill over to other social fields and later narrative formations. In this case, I suggest we trace the afterlives of Dieyi's queer feelings in the life and career of actor Leslie Cheung.

Gilles Deleuze tells us that close-ups of the actors' faces in films are affectively intense moments. As a close-up takes the face out of its ordinary function as a point of identification, the face in close-up "is an autonomous object, an immobile surface with motor tendencies" (Bogue, 2003, p. 78). "Once removed from social codes and the commonsense coordinates of space and time, the face becomes an affection-image: an image expressing an affective quality or power" (Bogue, 2003, p. 78). In this case, the court trial sequence in *Farewell* serves such a function; it also epitomises the paradoxical images of Dieyi. This also serves as an important moment for us to understand how the affective power of Leslie Cheung's performance on screen as Dieyi eventually exceeded the confinement of the frame and transformed the film into a social event.

## Farewell My State

After the Chinese nationalist regime's takeover of Beijing after the Japanese occupation period, Dieyi is accused of treason because he performs for the Japanese. Similar to Yan's (2003, pp. 68–75) observation of the trial scene from the canonical play of Chinese music drama, *Injustice Done to Dou E*, this is a moment when the ethical question of "just" and "unjust" is dramatised. Accused of betraying his country, Dieyi refuses to comply with Xiaolou's scheme to lie about his performance as a forced action under threat from the Japanese. On the contrary, Dieyi proudly admits that he performed for the Japanese, announcing to the listening public that "the Japanese really know how to appreciate the beauty of the *Kun* opera". This short speech enacts a performative gesture that claims his agency as an embodiment of the ultimate principle of aesthetic freedom. In the sequence that follows, a shot-reverse-shot introduces a confrontation between the demands of the court of the state and the silent protest of the artist.

Shouting out "Let me die!", Dieyi has no intention of "negotiating" with the state. His absolute intransigence uncompromisingly demands that the state and its people confront his "queer feelings". When the sequence cuts to a close-up of Dieyi's face, the camera lingers on his ecstatic embrace of death, creating an unsettling feeling that "compels a cognitive rupture while also activating a site for audiences to pause, think, reflect, feel, create, and act upon their own positionings in the battlefields of the real, the truthful, and the ethical" (Yan, 2003, p. 76).

Dieyi's queer feelings generate an affective power that is so strong that this cognitive rupture exceeds the textual boundary of *Farewell*. If the close-up of Dieyi's face is the source of such affective power, its doubleness with Leslie Cheung's face might have produced an effect of conflation – a process of affective investment from the viewing public that yokes the character to the actor and blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. In so doing, the affective moment initiates a process of discursive formation in which the actor's performance, the public forum and the marketing strategy of the industry co-constitute a social field in which discussions about queerness take place. The meaning of *Farewell* cannot be limited to the contours of the text; it must be considered as an event, propelled by the affect of Leslie Cheung's performance.

When the voyeuristic Hong Kong tabloids started to gossip about his "true" sexuality after the release of the film, Leslie Cheung enacted a series of social and aesthetic performances in response to hyperbolise the social discussions about his sexuality. Instead of coming out as a loud and proud *tongzhi* public figure, Cheung, via his performances, created a glittering maze to lure social attention and frustrate any normative sexual logic. How do we make sense of this ambiguity in his social performance? Did it succumb to the heteronormative surveillance of the society? Or, was he using his poetic licence to further destabilise reified categories of sexual identity?

I find Helen Hok-Sze Leung's analysis very helpful here. Drawing upon interviews, Cheung's official responses to gossip, and his subsequent performances in films and concerts, Leung reads Cheung's star persona as an ongoing process of queering, a theatrical gesture to hyperbolise, de-link and reshuffle the normative alignments of sex/gender/sexuality. She sees his performances, rather than as a public coming out, as a strategy of masking that "incite[s] us to recognize a plethora of ignorances about what we do not or cannot yet know of gender embodiment, sexual identity, queer kinship, and most of all, who and what he was" (Leung, 2008, p. 105). Leung's reading of Leslie Cheung does not hold him up as a gay icon for queer identity politics that will rally and mobilise social activism. It could be said that sexual activism is one of the effects produced by Leslie Cheung's queer performances. The theatricality of his various personas is not a consequence of his shying away from gay and lesbian politics. Rather, it is an ongoing refusal to be pinned down by any identitarian category. His queerness lies in an ongoing process of becoming, which keeps the universalising/minoritising process in modern sexual knowledge production in constant interrogation.[10]

Furthermore, even after Cheung's suicide in real life, at his funeral, a traditional ritual defining Confucian kinship structure was also troubled when his lover, Mr Tang, appeared as his brother. The paradoxical performance of filial/incestuous brotherly love, in part, affectively appeals to the viewing public for a sense of communal bonding; in another, it unsettles people's preconceived understanding of the ethical category of "brother" in the Confucian moral system and hence demands a radical renewal and reconsideration of the system. If we think of Leslie Cheung's performances as a continuation of the afterlives of Dieyi's queer feelings, we might claim that he embodies the paradoxical tension between personal desire and moral demand in the *chuanqi* tradition. *Chuanqi* starts as storytelling in the social field of the commoners. Leslie Cheung's performances are the ongoing *chuanqi* in the contemporary social field of gossip. Refusing to assert a politics of who I am, the

feelings will continue to queer the normative demands of morality, kinship systems and technologies of subject formation. As the tradition persists throughout history, the queer feelings of Dieyi and Leslie Cheung will be relived and invoked in other lives and stories long after their death.

If it takes analysis of Leslie Cheung's subsequent performances to elucidate how the paradox of *qing* in the *chuanqi* tradition in its contemporary reiteration can generate queerness for the possibility of human transformation, I will demonstrate, through a close reading of how *Green Snake* the film departs from its conventional narrative, how this possibility can be achieved at the textual level.

## The Nonhuman as Queer

*Green Snake*, directed by Tsui Hark, revises another work from the Chinese theatrical tradition – *The Legend of the White Snake*. Starting in the Southern Song period (1127–1279), this folkloric tradition went through many modifications over the centuries and multiplied into textualised and non-textualised forms in fictional, theatrical and oral genres.[11] As part of an oral tradition, this folk tale has had different narrative formats and structures throughout history. Nevertheless, an agreed contour of the story generally depends upon the late Ming literati figure Feng Menglong's (1574–1646) version in his collected short stories, *Jing Shi Tong Yan* (Stories to Caution the World).[12] It can be summarised as follows: Two snakes, one white and one green, practise Buddhism tenaciously in order to become human beings. As they take on human forms, they appear as a lady and her page (or as older and younger sisters), an ethically hierarchised social relationship that reflects the disparity in their years of religious practice. The white snake, with her superior thousand-year advantage, adopts the full female name of Bai Suzhen and schemes to lure Xu Xian, a young Confucian scholar, into a conjugal relationship for the ultimate achievement of humanity. The green snake, due to its less intense training, can only be named Xiao Qing (a nickname) by her superior, Bai. Her progress towards full humanity depends upon Bai's pedagogy. A monk – Fahai – intervenes in Bai's plan. Regarding her scheme as a "gross offence to the Tao", Fahai musters his superhuman powers to sabotage this unethical relationship and successfully imprisons Bai in the Leifeng pagoda, while sparing the life of Bai's newborn son.

*Green Snake* inherits the contours of this story and takes the sphere of feelings in the oral tradition to another level. If the sphere of feelings in the oral tradition emerges at the moments when Bai's feelings conflict with Fahai's ethical intervention, *Green Snake* reinforces this sphere by foregrounding the nonhuman dimension in this ethical dilemma. Three realms of existence can be parsed from the story – the superhuman world of Fahai, the human world of Xu Xian, and the nonhuman world of the snakes. If the story exposes the limitations of human ethics by introducing a battle between the superhuman and the nonhuman, the opening sequence of the film foreshadows how this divide will eventually fall apart.

In the opening sequence, Fahai stands serenely on an elevated platform, observing the hustle and bustle of a market. A series of montages juxtaposes Fahai's stern and emotionless look with the distorted and deformed physiques of the crowd. Fahai, dressed in a pure white Buddhist robe, quietly and motionlessly surveys the goings-on around him, while the mob-like crowd, dressed in dirty blue outfits, is engaged in

a riot of butchering, cock fighting, sculpting demonic totems, and wrestling. The stark contrast between Fahai and the crowd highlights the polarisation of two realms of existence – the serene transcendence and the boisterous immanence – that are hierarchically layered and clearly demarcated. This sequence ends with a close-up of Fahai's expressionless face. With both eyes closed, he says, "Humans", in a contemptuous tone. His condescension towards the human world indicates his disdain towards its proximity to the nonhuman, which further explains his self-righteous commitment to the policing of the existential boundaries.

The following combat sequence depicts Fahai's superhuman surveillance. In this martial arts sequence, Fahai forces a spider to shed its human form as a monk and reveal its monstrosity. Fahai successfully imprisons the spider in a pavilion. Fahai's overconfidence only leads him to realise his limitations. Upon discovering an aura-emanating string of Buddhist beads on a tree, Fahai suddenly realises that his hunting down of the nonhuman is merely a mistake born of misrecognition. The nonhuman has now been "naturalised", and proves to be more human than that which is most human.

Traditionally, the category of the non human, *yao*, is often used as a literary or rhetorical device for engaging in fictional or philosophical discussions of human ethics. As a paradoxical category of existence, *yao*, on the one hand, possess superhuman power to move between realms of beings; on the other, they are deemed as inferior to the human because of their presumed lack of ethics. In many stories, their seemingly superhuman power is only granted so they can become human. Their movement in and out of the human realm usually causes evaluative, if not transformative, re interpretations of what it means to be human.

*Green Snake* expands our ethical re-evaluations of this tradition. It resituates the ethical tensions in the parameters of queer feelings. If traditionally *The Legend of the White Snake* focuses on the clash between Bai's desire and Fahai's moral principles, *Green Snake* makes Xiao Qing the central character, foregrounding her queer feelings as the site of contestation where the ethical codes of humanity are subject to change.

## Passages into Humanity

The opening transformation sequence of the film starts with two half-serpent/half-human creatures circling on the roof of a pleasure house. Against a backdrop of thunder and rain, the two "in-between" creatures slowly take on human forms. In a median shot, the two creatures nestle closely, rubbing their faces together. This sensual moment powerfully disturbs the audience's cognitive understanding of human intimacy. On the one hand, the female-female snuggling evokes homoeroticism; on the other, the half-serpent/half-human creates an unsettling hint of bestiality. Far from associating homoeroticism with a subhuman form of sexual practice, this hyper-sensual moment produces a visceral impact on the audience's sensory perceptions, destabilising its conventional understanding of human sexuality.

This transient moment of *jouissance* is soon replaced by the divergent paths of the two snakes. Distracted by the Indian music and dance in the pleasure house, Xiao Qing slides down into the middle of the stage and mingles with the erotic dancers. Meanwhile, Bai finds herself fascinated by the poetic recitation coming from a

nearby school. She swims across the river to get a peek at the handsome instructor – Xu Xian. This sequence interweaves their separate desires after their primary transformation into human form. Bai, presumably closer to the human world, is driven towards human perfection, a goal represented by the school and its preaching of Confucian classics. By contrast, Xiao Qing's ''downfall'' into the pleasure house indicates her propensity for the ''unethical'' and her tendency to fall back into the nonhuman.

Their ''uneven'' access to humanity is spatially constructed through the transformation sequence, which further creates a discrepancy between the two. Their divergence is further shown in many scenes. In a walking scene, Xiao Qing gets tired of walking upright and dangles on a tree branch like a snake. Bai scolds her for ''not being like a human'' and teaches her the proper way to ''walk like a human''. In another scene, Bai counts Buddhist beads in front of a pot of burning incense, while Xiao Qing chases rats through the beams of a house. Bai scolds Qing for being monstrous. Qing, instead of abiding by Bai's order, retaliates and asserts her monstrosity as superior to Xu Xian's humanity. In traditional narratives, this discrepancy merely reflects the two snakes' unequal ability to sustain the human form, whereas *Green Snake* appropriates this difference as its revisionist leverage – it uses this difference to expose the structural limitations of human ethics and challenge the legitimacy of the superhuman sovereign.

Xiao Qing's understanding of the human is always mediated through Bai, and often, when juxtaposed with Bai's image, appears to be a ''hyperbolic mimicry''. If Bai mimics the codes of femininity only to reaffirm their legibility, Xiao Qing's mimicry appears to be excessive and ironic, ridiculing the legibility of these codes. The discrepancy in their mimicry of human behavioural codes, in a sense, may create an effect of Butlerian performative reiteration, a kind of ''citation (that) will emerge as *theatrical* to the extent that it *mines and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses''* (Butler, 1993, p. 232; original emphasis). Nevertheless, the discrepancy is not used primarily to dismantle the legitimacy of codes of femininity; it aims for an affective appeal for a reconsideration of ethics.

Analysis of a few key moments in the film will further help us to understand how this affective appeal is eventually achieved. During the ballad sequence, Xiao Qing playfully imitates Bai's ''feminine style'' and tries it on Xu Xian. Witnessing this unethical ''incestuous'' moment, Bai offers Xiao Qing a one-on-one lesson on human ethics, telling her the importance of loyalty. A scene of monogamous pedagogy, surprisingly, evolves into a moment of sisterly intimacy. Xiao Qing, nestling her head in Bai's lap, gets tired of Bai's preaching about wifehood and starts to flirt with her. The two fall into the pond and start to engage in intimate play in the water. This moment witnesses the emergence of ''queer feeling''. Mimicking the ''heteronormative'' structure of feelings between Bai and Xu Xian, Xiao Qing does not enter into a competitive relationship with Bai. Instead, her transformation into the human proper begins with her *feelings* towards Bai. Her feelings, however, are not recognised within Bai's measurement of humanity. In a confrontation between the two, Bai attributes Qing's inability to understand her complicated relationship with Xu Xian to Qing's lack of ''tears'', an affective indicator used by Bai to measure humanity.

Their divergences finally come together in the final confrontation scene between them and Fahai. Echoing the opening combat scene, this concluding battle scene is

also pivotal for us to understand how the sphere of feelings implies a mutual constitution of transcendence and immanence and how the figure of the nonhuman facilitates such an imbrication and its subsequent transformation of humanity.

Despite all Bai's philanthropical works in the village, Fahai is determined to end the ethical wrongdoings, separating the snakes from Xu Xian. Fahai abducts Xu Xian and takes him to the Golden Mountain temple, forcing him to convert to Buddhism as a way to purge himself of contamination. The two snakes come to Xu's rescue, conjuring up a flood to destroy the temple. In the midst of this battle, Bai's power is suddenly diminished by her pregnancy. She loses control of the flood, accidentally submerging the human world. In her desperation to save the innocent, Bai summons the strength to reverse the flood, only to be inundated herself. Thrown from the sky by the flood, Bai becomes caught in a pile of debris, in which we see her giving birth. While Bai proves her ultimate achievement of humanity by giving birth to a new human life, Xiao Qing, on her way to save Xu Xian, also eventually acquires the ability to shed tears and completes, according to Bai's standard, her passage into humanity.

Holding up Bai's baby, Xiao Qing offers her shoulder to the weakening Bai. At this moment of catastrophe, Xiao Qing finally comes to realise that her feelings towards Bai are no different from the "human feelings" that Bai has been trying to teach her. The discrepancy between the two finally converges, not to resolve the disparity but to reverse it. Asked by Bai to fetch Xu Xian, Xiao Qing, instead of following her sister's command as usual, turns around and voices her objections. She protests, "You always tell me human beings have feelings. Shouldn't we hold the same view of nonhumans?" Bai's pedagogy of normative human feelings eventually leads to this emergence of queer feelings. Xiao Qing's talking back is an interrogative act towards the legibility of social, ethical scripts. She finally acquires the ability to shed tears, only to understand how limited and exclusive the human world can be. Her emergence into humanity, in this regard, queers the normalising definition of humanity by activating a feeling that cannot be contained within the intelligible realm of the human proper.

The film ends with Xiao Qing's satirical taunting of the human world. Abandoning the floating piles of human ruination and waste, she disappears amidst claims that she will return in the future, leaving Fahai standing in the midst of human chaos with Bai's newborn child in his arms. The final image fixes on Fahai holding a new species that cannot be neatly categorised as human or nonhuman, denoting the engendering of a new modality of humanity as well as narrative. *Green Snake* problematises the definition of humanity by way of the metaphorical tug-of-war between the human and the nonhuman. This artistic intervention reminds us of Agamben's theorisation of sovereignty via the non human. Using the figure of the werewolf, Agamben argues that the nonhuman is "a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, physics and nomos, exclusion and inclusion ... this threshold alone, which is neither simple natural life nor social life but rather bare life or sacred life, is the always present and always operative presupposition of sovereignty" (Agamben, 1995, pp. 105–06). In other words, the transcendence of the sovereign is in absolute interdependence with the immanence of the human world. It is the in-between-ness of the nonhuman that makes the separation of both possible. If, in Agamben's formulation, the nonhuman is the

''can-be-killed-but-cannot-be-sacrificed'' *homo sacre* who solidifies the existence of the sovereign, the nonhuman in *Green Snake* enables a mutual rejuvenation of both, envisioning a second coming where her queer feelings will eventually be recognised.

## Queer Feeling, Queer Becoming

Evoking the paradoxical notion of *qing*, the films *Farewell My Concubine* and *Green Snake* are two contemporary examples of how this cultural tradition can take on new lives and stimulate new forms of affective subjectivities. For the politically minded, they are examples of cinematic articulations of *tongzhi* identities – local forms of sexual dissidence informed by global gay liberationist politics. Certainly, I cannot deny that the influence of global gay emancipatory politics is the historical condition that has made their appearance possible. Nevertheless, through tracing the queer feelings back to the *chuanqi* tradition, I hope to demonstrate that these two films cannot be reduced to cinematic gay politics. The sensibility they evoke is queerness itself in the sense that their affective appeal is a form of sentimentalism for the renewal of human ethics. Although *Farewell* forecloses such a possibility at the textual level, its uncontainable affective force has traversed the narrative closure and bled into the gossip and discourses surrounding Leslie Cheung's various personas. *Green Snake* uses poetic licence to reiterate a traditional tale and fundamentally change all traditional moral presuppositions. It ends with a moment of ambiguity when the moral arbiter, Fahai, seems to be lost in the piles of human waste created by his seemingly righteous deeds. Xiao Qing's announcement that she will return in the future leaves the narrative thread open-ended, creating the possibility of an ongoing renewal of human ethics through the interrogative force of *qing*.

Joshua Goldstein has perceptively observed that the ultimate principle in Chinese fiction writing and theatrical aesthetics is to build a ''community of *qing*''; this principle has been pronounced since the Ming and was promoted in the Republican era for the urgent purpose of rebuilding the Chinese community. Nevertheless, Goldstein cautions us against a convenient equation of this community of *qing* with the Chinese nation state. The principle of building a community of *qing* is more like an aspiration towards an ethical community in which each person can be free of the dominance of outside forces and freely express his or her genuine feelings. In a sense, the community of *qing* is an open-ended idea of affective utopia through which artists and poets can imagine and create their communities-in-coming where an ethical world based on genuine feelings is made possible (Goldstein, 2007, pp. 137–45).

In light of Goldstein's analysis, we might argue, even though *qing* can be deployed to spawn national sympathy for the purposes of nation building, as the cases in the early Republican era show, it is nevertheless an intrinsically paradoxical concept – the tension between genuine personal feelings and ethical demands will never be resolved. It is this paradox that keeps this community of *qing* an open-ended coming Utopia, whose boundaries are the infinite horizons of hope that can never be circumscribed.

Therefore, the queer feelings produced by *Farewell* and *Green Snake* must be considered as affective forces that keep ethics and politics in a state of constant re-territorialisation. If ''Chineseness'' indicates the contours of proper ethics of a

Chinese person or the civility of a Chinese citizen, *Farewell* and *Green Snake* reframe the ethico-political question of Chineseness as an aesthetic question. They do not, however, presume a divide between the two but see them engaging with each other in a constant process of negotiation. The ethico-political order of Chineseness, as the community of *qing* implies, cannot simply be predetermined by the state apparatus, but is constantly challenged and restructured by the power of feelings.

Along this line of thought, we see how Dieyi in *Farewell My Concubine* and Xiao Qing in *Green Snake* create affective forces to queer the ethico-political orders of Chineseness. To read these films beyond the scope of queer identity politics, we need to find their radical interrogations of the sex/gender/sexuality normative alignment in those affective moments.

## Notes

1. For an historical account of the discursive formation of *tongzhi* through global cinematic flows, see Song Hwee Lim (2006, p. 22).
2. Many scholars of translational queer cultures have touched upon the politics of sameness and difference in the glocal process of the making of locally-bounded queer cultures and identities. For example, see Fran Martin's (2003) study on the Taiwanese case and Tom Boellstorff's (2005) study on the Indonesian case.
3. For a more detailed discussion of the naming of this genre and its extended definitions, see Sing-chen Lydia Chiang's overview (2005, pp. 10–28).
4. See Chiang (2005).
5. Here, I refer to Jonathan Flatley's distinction of emotion and affect. In general, emotions index interiorised psychological states of individuals, whereas affect refers to the sensations and emotive flows that cause intersubjective relationships to change. See Flatley (2008, pp. 11–27).
6. Rey Chow terms this tradition *wenqing zhuyi* and connects it with the tradition of sentimentalism in Western culture. For Chow, *wenqing zhuyi* shares with sentimentalism a strong penchant for sentimental education. See Chow (2007, pp. 17–22).
7. See chapters 4–5 in Fan (2003, pp. 46–84).
8. Scholars who engage in the critique of the suffering woman image include Rey Chow (1995, pp. 12–14), Dai Jinhua (1999, pp. 191–206) and Chris Berry (1999), to name just a few.
9. For example, see Berry (1993, p. 21).
10. Here, I refer to Eve Sedgwick's concept of "the epistemology of the closet", in which she understands the divide between heterosexuality/homosexuality as a process of universalising and minoritising. That is to say, while the medical discourse essentialises homosexuality as a pathology limited to a minor group in the population, constructionists create a spectrum of human sexuality by showing homosexuality as part of the spectrum and universally applicable to everyone. See Sedgwick (1990, pp. 67–90).
11. For a more detailed historical account of the transmission of this folkloric tradition see Fan Jing-Lan's discussion (2003).
12. See Fan's discussion (2003).

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